

Serve & Sacrifice – My summer experience being a missionary in Albania

By Anastasia (Stacey L. Gleeson)

As a young teen, I was fortunate to participate in a church-sponsored service trip that allowed me to travel to West Virginia to help those in need. The experience was impactful. I fondly remember the feeling of gratitude for the opportunity of helping an elderly woman clean up her home with new paint and of spending time with her each day and seeing how appreciative she was of strangers willing to help her. This experience and memory left me with a yearning in my heart to do more of this type of work. As the years passed and I grew into adulthood, the longing lingered. And then, once again, I was afforded the opportunity to engage in a missionary trip through my Orthodox Christian faith.

What would it be like to be an Orthodox missionary? How would I know unless I experienced it? Over the years, I have expressed this desire with family and friends, but struggled to act. My professional career and local volunteer work at my church took priority.

However, a life experience motivated me to finally put my desire of a missionary trip into action. Early in 2017, my father passed away in a car accident. Instant, sudden, and unexpected. My father's passing has shaped my priorities and caused me to deepen my prayer life. As a result, I started to research Orthodox Christian mission trips with my parish priest. Instead of taking a trip with a group of Americans abroad, I wanted to create my own authentic trip to truly learn and feel what it is like to be an Orthodox Christian missionary outside of the U.S. I wanted to experience being by myself, learning a new language and culture without the distraction of others. I took a risk and asked my parish priest if he could help me arrange to spend a month or more supporting a long-term missionary in Albania who was part of his network. At the same time, I initiated discussions at work with my manager and human resources to see if a personal leave of this type would even be possible.

I am thankful that everything fell quickly into place. At Munich Re, where I work, we have a supportive culture that understands how managing life is different for each person, and fully supports efforts to make a difference in the lives of others. Because of this, and with the support and approval of my manager, I was able to take a Personal Leave of Absence to volunteer my time abroad, fulfilling my desire to learn and live a missionary life.

The experience in Albania was transformational. I did not expect to have a significant impact on the lives of youths so quickly, especially because I do not speak their language. Instead, I was reminded how important one's actions are to others. I learned that when one permits the power of their faith to work through them, individuals can make a profound impact on others without the necessity of spoken words.

While there, I joined the three church camps for girls that were held in the monastery of St. John the Vladimir near Elbasan, Albania. During the first camp session for girls ages 10-13, I assisted the camp leaders with many tasks, and had an opportunity to share a bible lesson with the girls. One particular day I was asked to fill in for two counselors to help oversee one of the groups of eight girls. We were taking a hike outside of the monastery grounds to a nearby river to have one of our church services. I was super excited because of my love for hiking, and at the same time humbled to help despite the language barriers. It was a lovely experience as we got our feet wet in the river. One girl in particular touched my heart as she was somewhat timid and fearful during the hike, so I stayed very close by her side. The next day I had my lesson with the girls, and afterwards opened it up for questions on being an Orthodox Christian in the U.S., and my conversion at 24 years of age. The same girl asked me what it felt like when I was baptized. It struck me as a mature question. The following day I understood why she asked me this question. It was the day for the girls to be baptized. And who did I see standing in the back of the church in a white linen dress? The young girl who clung by my side during the hike just a few days before, the girl who asked me the question about how I felt after being baptized. What happened next still brings tears to my eyes. She asked me a question in Albanian. I didn't know the words, but my heart had a sense that she was asking me to be her godmother. One of the young girls who spoke English helped translate, and sure enough, I was right. My heart skipped a beat. I had only been in Albania for 7 days. Yet, here I was participating in the baptismal service and having the great responsibility of a godmother to a young life. Transformational!

We are so fortunate today, with technology, that my goddaughter and I can stay connected – even though we don't speak the same language. I don't speak Albanian, yet 😊 and she doesn't speak English, yet 😊, but we are able to use smart phone apps to keep the communication going. Amazing.

There are so many more stories I can share about this time of service and sacrifice. However, the main lesson I learned from my experience is to take action when you want to make a difference in the world or manage your life. Your actions toward others can be more powerful than words.

From this experience, I have a better idea of how I can continue to support our missionaries overseas and expand my volunteer time to the ministry missions. Mission accomplished!